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# Liberal Education

P E R S P E C T I V E S

*The free man ought not to learn any study slavishly. Forced labors performed by the body don't make the body any worse, but no forced study abides in a soul.*

—PLATO, *THE REPUBLIC*

*Liberal education is concerned with the souls of men and therefore has little or no use for machines... Liberal education consists in learning to listen to still and small voices.*

—LEO STRAUSS, "LIBERAL EDUCATION AND RESPONSIBILITY"

*We are told that Alexander the Great took around with him a great number of authors engaged in writing about his achievements. And yet, as he stood beside the tomb of Achilles at Sigeum, he uttered these words: "Fortunate youth, who found*

*Homer to proclaim your valour!" He was right;*

*for, if the Iliad had never existed, the tomb where Achilles' body was buried would have buried his memory as well.*

—CICERO, "IN DEFENCE OF THE POET AULUS LICINIUS ARCHIAS"

**The classical notion of justice is not the modern idea of "social justice." Indeed, the latter may be inimical to the former**

VERY FEW, IF ANY, "IVY-CLAD TOWERS" REMAIN in academia today. 'Tis a pity. The physical towers remain, no doubt. We can still see them against the skies. But gone is the spirit that caused them to be pilloried and laughed at as useless enclaves devoted, like Socrates in the view of the comic poet, to floating spaced-out among the clouds of vague knowing. We are, I think, in desperate need of a few genuine "ivy-clad towers." Few students can matriculate through college or university today without spending considerable time concocting a "resume." On this parchment, the student solemnly records the amount of "well-rounded" time that he or she has spent in community service, or economic, or political, or ecological, or social, or other such do-good and be-good activities. The poor almost seem to exist so that academics can study them or so that university students can elevate their own consciousness by serving them for a short period.

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Ever sensitive to the ancient criticism that the privileged student is so separated from ordinary life that he or she cannot talk its language or understand its works, universities have, in recent years, responded with "community help" programs of every description. "Volunteering" has become, ironically, an obligation for graduation. The university, it is said, is to prepare for "life," as it is called. No

# & “Social Justice”



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glowingly into articulated “experience” either of work or of service. Gone are the days when the college years were conceived to be set aside, to be protected from the town precisely so that what students were supposed to be about could take place. To pass these years as an active preparation for work or politics meant, in the older view, neglecting what the university was for in the first place. Indeed, it was thought that the best preparation for practical life consisted in studying the higher things, the life of the mind. Someone thus prepared would have little trouble with practical things. But someone who spent his or her time largely with practical things would forever be mostly closed off from the higher things.

## **Justice**

A liberal education is not an education whose primary concern is to prepare its graduates to live in the actual city, even when they do eventually live in that city and appreciate it. They really do not need academia for this “practical” preparation. Rather, the university is primarily an enclave wherein one is free to teach the truth, no matter in what city a university might exist. The “city” that the university looked to was one “in speech” or “in mind,” as Plato said. It alone enabled everyone in every culture to talk to everyone. Such an occupation is, as we know from Socrates, often enough a dangerous business, and, lest we forget, many of its most serious dangers come from within itself, within the souls of the dons themselves, not from the city. The city, like the parents of the potential philosophers in *The Apology*, does not like to hear that a conflict can exist between polity and philosophy. It does not enjoy being reminded that it has killed philosophers and prophets. Philosophy does not particularly like to hear it either.

One of the perplexing things philosophers study is justice, particularly justice as a virtue of individuals, who, in their relations with one another, learn to render what is due and to tell the truth. What is now called “social justice,” however, can be studied, but it inhabits

longer do we find any barriers between town and gown. The purpose of the gown is the town, almost with a vengeance. One begins to wonder, with such orientations and implicit priorities, whether students learn anything but the town.

Students work five, ten, twenty hours a week, often on something that does not pay or pays poorly. They learn to translate such activities

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no soul. This latter is a theory of modernity, largely a product of Rousseau and Max Weber. It seeks to remove justice from the soul and relocate it in the relationships that constitute the polity. It is a last effort to prove Socrates wrong and actually to construct the best regime among us. Thus “social justice” and “democracy” are inexorably linked.

“[Social justice] thus takes for granted that social reform is at least as important as personal reform and that the just social order depends as much on institutions as on moral character,” Ernest Fortin wrote.

It calls for a radical redistribution of material resources or, short of that, the establishment of a system that reduces as much as possible the distance separating the social classes. Its immediate goal, in short, is to produce happy rather than good human beings. [It is claimed] that all human beings had a right to happiness, and not just to the pursuit of virtue. In the final analysis, there is one and only one just social order, whose broad outlines are prescribed in advance and therefore are not a proper object of deliberation on the part of wise and prudent legislators. (1997, 273–74)

The essence of classical political thought was precisely to deliberate on what actual regime is most suited to these people in their particular polity. It was not to force all people into the same regime in order to make them happy.

Men become good, it is claimed, not because of chosen acts and acquired personal habits, but because of “structures.” To change the soul we must change the “structures” through which the soul presumably acts. Aristotle had said, conversely, that the differing kinds of regime reflect the differing kinds of souls that inhabit it. He thought, like Plato, that changes in regime followed changes in soul. “Social justice” puts this orientation aside. The essential dynamism of society comes not from persons with souls but from the almost automatic workings of the laws and institutions. “Reform” becomes a political cry, not a steady effort to change our souls from within.

## Liberal education

The word “liberal” in the phrase “liberal education” means to be free, especially to be free of oneself, to be free of those passions and habits within us that might deflect us from grasping what is there. It also means to be free



to pursue the highest things in all their variety. It means to live in and participate in a polity that allows us, encourages us to pursue the truth, and to be free to live it when found. Moreover, “education” is not itself a subject of study. Strictly speaking, one cannot study “education.” To be educated does not mean to learn about learning, but to learn something, to learn *what is*. Education means the “bringing forth” from within us; it means the ability to address, in a proper manner, each reality before us. Philosophy is the quest for the whole. The very word “university” means this very whole. But it means that, at some time in our lives, we have an intellectual beginning so that we might later spend our lives in this pursuit, whatever else we do that is practical.

When we put the two words, “liberal” and “education,” together, we mean that we, each in our individual souls, are free to learn what is to be learned. It means that we are prepared to learn it, and having learned it, to accept it. In the beginning, we just have a mind, a capacity to know, but we know nothing until we use our knowing faculties. What is to be learned, however, is *all that is*. *All that is* includes ourselves learning what there is to learn. And it includes the various stages in our lives, as Plato said, in which we are most prepared to learn what is to be learned. We are to be free even of “ourselves,” as Yves Simon (1980) intimated. That is, our own vices and choices can prevent us from knowing what is there to be known. So to be “free” to learn includes



the capacity to rule ourselves so that we are free to direct our fears or pleasures or interests in such a way that we can really see what is there.

Does justice, especially what is now called “social justice,” have any place in liberal education? The classical notion of justice is not the modern idea of “social justice.” Indeed, the latter may be inimical to the former. What justice is itself comes under the discipline of what it is. That is, it is to be itself, not something else, not friendship, not charity, not obedience. Justice is a virtue, one of the classical moral virtues along with temperance, fortitude, and prudence, plus the minor virtues, as it were, of ruling our wealth, our temper, our wit, our social relation, our telling the truth.

Justice as a virtue refers immediately “to others.” In this sense, it is “political” in that it implies an order, including a legal order, in which relations to others can take place. As such, like all virtues, we have to acquire it by individual acts of justice. A just man is someone who freely rules himself in such a manner that, when he sees a situation demanding a just act of his in relation to others, he will be free to perform it and choose to do so. He will “render what is due” and he will “tell the truth” of the relationship in which he is involved, be it of paying a debt, of fulfilling an obligation, or of repairing damage he has caused.

The question “what is something for?” is a utility question. The question “*what is something?*” is a philosophical question, which includes the “for-what-the-thing-is.” Until we know what a thing is, we cannot know what it is for. But we know what it is, by following what it does. *Actio sequitur esse*.

Eric Voegelin (1957) says that at the execution of Socrates, the souls of those who sought the truth had to flee from the city to the academy. The Platonic academy itself was closed under the Emperor Justinian, the same year, 529 AD, as Josef Pieper (1960) said, that the first monastery was founded in Italy by St. Benedict. It was out of the monastery and the monastery schools that the medieval university was eventually formed. The university was to be a place where “everything” was to be freely addressed, but after the manner of mind.

The university was also a student place. It was to be protected from the polity. It did not have the same purpose as either the church or the civil society or the economy. The relationship is always tenuous both in the Socratic sense that

the politician can always kill the philosopher and in the Augustinian sense that the philosopher himself, full of pride, may betray the truth.

But the college or university was to be a place wherein great things could be known and studied in the souls of young men and women so that they could see what was noble, what was delightful, what was true. This wonder at what they beheld is what really prepared them to go into practical things out of which, when they were older, they could return to the issues that were of highest moment to human beings.

As Leo Strauss said, “liberal education consists in listening to still and small voices” (1968, 25). If drama and tragedy once fled from the city to the academy, thence to the monastery, thence to the university, the question finally must be asked, when the university itself flees back to the city, whether the highest things do not again have to find another place in which our souls are free to seek *what is*.

How few of us there are who can, with Alexander, stand at the tomb of Achilles at Sigeum. We have not had time, in our busy university life, to thank Homer for showing us what valor really is before we needed it in our practical lives. “No forced study abides in the soul.” We must strive, that our memories do not bury the body of Achilles because we had, in our studies, no time for the likes of the *Iliad*, which even a young emperor, concerned with his own fame, had read with admiration. □

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